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Does Food Assistance matter? – The Impacts of Food-for-Work in Mugu

1. Introduction

Food assistance is controversially discussed. While its live-saving functions in conflicts or natural disasters are undoubted, its developmental role as well as its longer-term impacts on recipients are often questioned (BMZ 2005; Habte Bulgu 2008; OECD 2005). Among these doubts is the assumption that food assistance would create "dependency" of recipients or recipient countries (e.g. BBC 2006; Elliesen 2002; Makenete et al. 1998; Moore/Stanford 2010).

Also in the Nepalese context this assumption on the dependency-creating aspects of food assistance is prevalent (e.g. Ghale 2009; see also the discussion in Nepali Times 2011a, 2011b). At the same time, the need for food assistance prevails due to high rates of undernourishment, especially in the mid- and far-western mountain regions of the country (WFP 2009c). The main agency of food assistance in Nepal is the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), which distributed food to 1.6 million people in 2009 (WFP 2010b). The aim of such interventions is not only to safe lives in emergencies, but to contribute to longer-term food security of recipients, thereby reflecting the organisation's double mandate of life-saving and developmental role (WFP 2008a). One main concept in this context are so called "food-based social safety nets", which are part of a broader strategy to fulfil these double roles.

Despite these efforts by the WFP, in Nepal the assumption of the detrimental effects of food assistance seem to prevail, although till today there is a lack of empirically grounded studies that would support or dismiss such critique by analyzing the impacts of food assistance on recipients, and the ways it influences their livelihoods and longer term food security.

The aim of this article is thus to contribute to fill this gap through an empirically grounded study on the impacts of food-for-work (FFW) as distributed by the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) in the remote Mugu district of mid-western Nepal. Its objective is to assess FFW's positive and negative impacts on recipients' livelihoods and their ability to deal with future shocks. The findings presented in this article are the result of a two months long field research in Mugu. The research was conducted between June and August 2009.

In the following section 2, I shortly introduce the theoretical background on which my research on food security and food assistance was based, including the entitlements framework, research done on vulnerability to food security, and on aid-dependency. Section 3 presents the findings and elaborates on the reasons of people's vulnerability towards food insecurity, and the ways they cope with the permanent food crisis. The fourth section outlines some observations on the impact of FFW on this context. The article concludes by presenting some general suggestions for policymakers and food aid agencies.

2. Food Insecurity and Food Assistance

2.1 Assessing Food Insecurity

Food security is defined as “a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO 2002: 49). Accordingly, food insecurity is characterised as the lack of access to food (FAO 2009; Sen 1981). Amartya Sen (1981, 1984, 1995, 1999) explained food insecurity as being a result of social inequalities and failing entitlements. He defines entitlements as

> “the set of alternative commodity bundles that a person can command in a society using the totality of rights and opportunities that he or she faces” (Sen 1984: 497).

Entitlement sets can be acquired through the transformation of a person’s endowments, the initial ownership of assets and resources (Sen 1981). Sen distinguished four types of entitlements: production based (growing food), trade based (buying or trading for food), own-labour based (working for food) and inheritance or transfer based (being given food by others, including food aid as “relief”-entitlement) entitlements (Devereux 2001: 246). If the full range of a person’s entitlements does not provide them with adequate food (e.g. when drastic food price increases disable people from purchasing food which corresponds to a decline in their trade entitlement) they face starvation. Hunger is thus not (always and only) caused by a decline in food availability but a result of a food entitlement decline.

These entitlements are embedded in the political economy of a society, framed by the ways of distribution of money and productive resources (Watts 2002; Watts/Bohle 1993a), and framed by dynamic formal and informal laws (Leach et al. 1999), as well as by policies and international agreements (Watts 2002).

Research on social vulnerability to food insecurity further embedded the entitlements approach into a longer-term historical perspective, taking into account the consequences of famine and the issue of recovery (Watts/Bohle 1993b). Social vulnerability is a relational concept that not only attempts explaining various factors and processes leading to the exposure to food insecurity but also stresses the ways people cope with it in order to maintain their livelihoods including food security (Bohle 2001). Vulnerability has therefore always an external side of exposure, including various risks, shocks, and stresses to which a person can be subjected; and an internal side referring to people’s ability to cope with the situation (Chambers 1989: 1). Those persons are most vulnerable, who are most exposed to perturbations or stresses, who have the most circumscribed capability to cope with these stresses, and a limited potential to recover after the occurrence of a crisis (Watts/Bohle 1993a: 45).

Often people confronted with shocks do not obtain the means to cope in a way that would secure their resources, and therefore rely on so called “devastating coping strategies” (Maxwell et al. 2003). These include the selling of assets such as productive resources, cattle or tools, or consumption of seeds, so that their potentiality to recover from shocks does seriously decline and their vulnerability increases.

This discussion suggests that food security, vulnerability, and entitlements are mainly qualitative issues. While quantitative data can provide information on household’s income, number of cattle and size of productive resources such as landownership, the question of access to food is very much dependent on power relations. Assessing the reasons behind a certain endowment with resources requires a qualitative approach that not only describes the current situation (as quantitative data do), but that encounters the reasons for the differential

distribution of assets and the entitlements. Access to food is not an absolute but a relative issue, as the case study below will demonstrate.

A way to reduce households' or people's vulnerability to food insecurity would be to support their entitlements by increasing/supporting their assets and endowments on which their entitlements are based, or to secure them from selling their assets in times of crisis. This is the idea of so called "productive safety-nets" which will be subject of the next section.

2.2 Food Assistance and Social Safety Nets

Food assistance can be regarded as an alternate entitlement for people facing an entitlement decline. It attains the role of an alternative source of food that helps recipients to retain their assets, which they otherwise would have to sell in order to get food. As such it provides a safety net securing people from falling further into poverty during crises (WFP 1999). It may also supplement already existent social safety nets as for example provided through the extended family, neighbours, or friends.

Such a safety-net approach is applied by the UN-WFP. In its most recent strategic plan for 2008-2013 (WFP 2008b), the WFP announced a "revolution" (WFP 2010a) by changing its approach from food aid to food assistance. While it is hard to determine any huge changes in the *meaning* of these two terms, however, the shift to food assistance entailed a change in strategies of how to tackle food insecurity, including an extended range of programming instruments, such as Cash-for-Work (instead of only food-for-work) (ibid). An important element of food assistance are "safety-nets", in a working definition described as follows:

> "Food-based safety nets provide direct, regular and predictable food assistance, in cash or in kind, to the most vulnerable people, to prevent them from falling below a minimum level of food security as a result of a shock, to increase their resilience to shocks and – in some cases – to promote their food security " (WFP 2011b: 1).

The basic idea of food-based safety nets is to provide people who face hunger with a sufficient amount of food (or cash to purchase food) in order to help them saving their assets, such as cattle, machines, or land, which they otherwise would have to sell in order to get food. Food-based safety nets are part of WFP strategic objective number two, the prevention of acute hunger and the investment in disaster preparedness and mitigation (WFP 2008b: 16). The safety nets approach is not new to the WFP, and has been outlined already in previous documents of the organization (see e.g. WFP 1999, 2004).
Food-safety-nets are themselves a sub-set of social safety nets (FAO/GTZ 2005) that are again elements of the broader approach of social protection, referring to transfer programmes that "seek to reduce poverty and vulnerability by redistributing wealth and protecting households against income shocks" (FAO 2006: 22). The FAO stresses that food-based safety nets do not only play a role in providing food during crises (which refers to the live-saving function of food assistance), but also play a role in the protection of, or investment in, assets (FAO 2006: 24). Therefore they combine short-term goals of securing people and their assets during crisis with longer-term goals of building resilience towards shocks and contributing to longer-term food security. The FAO also stressed the role of safety-nets in securing citizens' right to food. In this context,

> "assistance should be provided in a regular, reliable, timely and transparent way and must take full account of the needs and priorities of the rights holders" (FAO 2005: 3),

mentioning regularity, reliability, timeliness, and transparency as criteria along which food-based social safety nets can be evaluated.

Barrett and Maxwell (2005: 209), however, criticize that safety nets do not work for people who are already in a state of destitution. These would need assistance for the *creation* and not (only) for the preservation of assets. This is the idea of "cargo nets" (ibid.) that aim at "increase[ing] the stock and productivity of chronically poor people's productive assets so as to enable them to climb out of chronic poverty and vulnerability" (ibid). If integrated into longer-term developmental programmes and objectives, also food-for-work can be part of such a cargo net (ibid: 131).

2.3 Possible Effects of Food Assistance

The influence of food assistance on recipients has been discussed controversially; while some stress the developmental and life-saving roles of food assistance, others blame food assistance for creating dependency, even resulting in a longer-term decline of recipients' ability to cope with shocks and crises. The literature on food aid-dependency (Barrett 2006; FAO 2006; Harvey/Lind 2005; Lentz et al. 2005) offers a valuable entrance point to discuss these issues.

In these debates, the impacts of food assistance are differentiated into insurance- and transfer-effects. Both effects are resulting from food assistance induced incentives and disincentives that translate into livelihood decisions and actions. While insurance effects appear prior the possible distribution of aid, transfer-effects happen only after the start of programmes. Both classes of effects might have positive or negative longer-term impacts on recipients' food security.

Insurance-effects

Insurance effects are resulting from recipients' expectations regarding future assistance. They are a function of expectation, information and transparency of the (potential) distribution of aid (Lentz et al. 2005; Little 2008). Only when people can rely on the distribution of assistance they can readily depend on it (ibid).

Food assistance in this context can supplement already existing social safety nets (as provided in networks of mutual help, such as family, friends, or neighbours), and provide an insurance for those without access to alternative support during crisis. It can thereby enable people to take more risks in their livelihood decisions. On the other hand, the expectation of food assistance might simultaneously result in the "crowding out" of existing safety nets among neighbours and family, or induce a risk-taking behaviour that exceeds responsible levels. It might also make people producing less as they except external food to be delivered (Barrett 2006; FAO 2006; Lentz et al. 2005). These effects can then result in the decreased capacity to deal with shocks independently from external assistance.

Transfer-effects

Transfer-effects emerge after the distribution of aid and reflect the function of food assistance as an additional transfer of assets to households (Barrett/Maxwell 2005: 131; FAO 2006: 28).

Food assistance in this context can be conceptualized as an additional entitlement. The basic idea of FFW thereby is to transform human capital or labour into food, by providing

participants a prescribed amount of food in exchange for their work in a community project. This way they are hindered from employing 'devastating coping-strategies' (OECD 2005), such as eating less, eating seeds, or selling productive assets in order to obtain food (Maxwell et al. 2003). As such, food assistance can attain the role of a safety-net, preventing households from slipping further into poverty (OECD 2005), while at the same time aiming at the generation of assets to help recipients to increase their capacity to cope with shocks in future.

However, while FFW's positive contribution is the relaxing of household assets constraints, and helping households to preserve assets, it might simultaneously lead to a decline of on-farm activities in favour of food-for-work, or the loss of traditional ecological knowledge, reducing the longer-term coping capacity of recipients, adding up to a "dependency-syndrome" (Barrett 2006; Harvey/Lind 2005; Lentz et al. 2005).

These positive and negative effects of food assistance are reflected in the definitions of "positive" and "negative" dependency. Positive dependency thereby refers to the intended life-saving functions of food assistance. "[D]ependence on external assistance enhances welfare, the alternative is destitution" (Lentz et al. 2005: 12). It helps recipients to meet basic needs when they otherwise could not. Yet, "when meeting current needs is achieved at the cost of reducing recipients' capacity to meet their own basic needs in the future without external assistance" (ibid.) this is referred to as "negative dependency". Figure 1 summarizes some of the possible effects of food assistance.

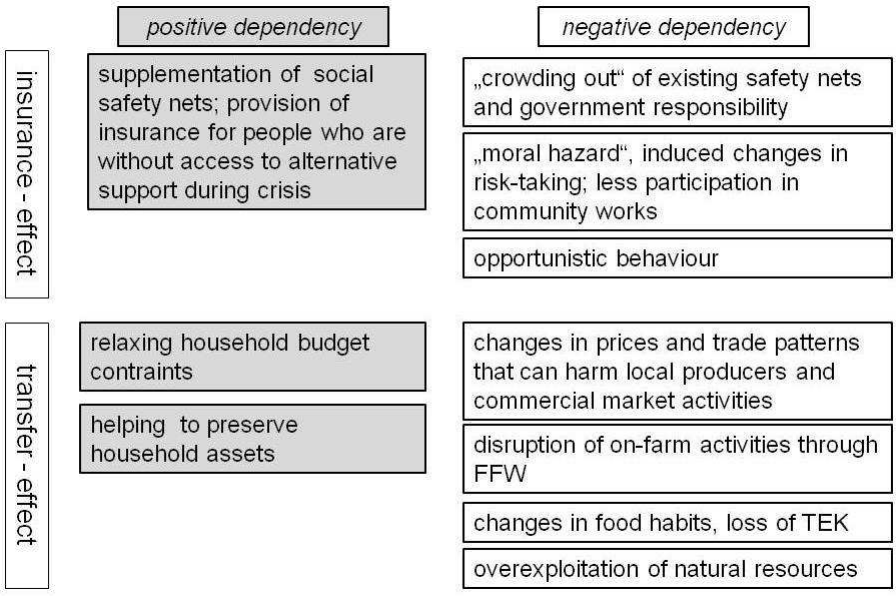

Figure 1: Possible effects of food assistance, adapted from Adhikari 2008; Barrett 2006; Harvey/Lind 2005; Lentz et al. 2005. TEK refers to Traditional Ecological Knowledge. Source: Bishokarma 2011

In this context it is important to distinguish different types of food assistance. While the bulk of food assistance is today provided in the form of emergency aid (FAIS 2011), a smaller part is distributed in form of project or programme food aid (ibid). Further, there are several different ways of distributing food assistance, ranging from unconditional emergency aid, over school-feeding programmes, to conditional transfers in form of cash or food in exchange for work (for a discussion see: Barrett/Maxwell 2005). Among these, food-for-work (FFW) is

still a famous and wide-spread tool for distribution of aid, although more and more cash-transfers are entering the field of food assistance (WFP 2010a). The present study focuses on the impact of FFW.

Before turning to this aspect however, a general overview about people's vulnerability to food insecurity and their food entitlements is due.

3 Living at the Edge – Food Security in Mugu

The Karnali zone[1] in north-west Nepal belongs to the most food insecure areas of the country (WFP 2010b). According to a sub-regional hunger index, it ranges into extremely alarming categories, with rates of undernourishment among adults of about 54 percent (WFP 2009c). Among the reasons for this high food insecurity are the rather low agricultural productivity due to low technization standards, small plot sizes, and adverse weather situations including droughts and hailstorms, the lack of access to regular employment opportunities, lack of roads and transportation facilities, resulting in higher commodity prices on the few markets, and the problematic health situation (UMN 2004, 2008; WFP 2009c: 21). The general lack of development is also reflected in the low Human Development Index, which ranks the region least in whole Nepal (UNDP 2004). Especially worse is the situation in Mugu district (ibid).

According to data of UNDP (2004), 68.5 percent of the children under five are undernourished and the share of population with a life-expectancy below 40 years is 40.3 percent. About 45 percent of the population does not have access to save drinking water (ibid). Also in educational terms Mugu ranks far below other districts: only 5.2 percent of women are literate, compared to 41.6 percent of men (ibid). Other problems are the lack of electricity (despite of some houses with solar-panels for generating electricity), sanitation, and health facilities.

Although subsistence agriculture and animal husbandry form the main base of livelihoods in Mugu, they do not provide sufficient food due to low agricultural productivity. As the access to food is not guaranteed through these production entitlements, people have to rely on other sources of food.

People engage in various activities including labour migration or sale of Non-Timber-Forest-Products to fulfil their basic needs (Adhikari 2008). Yet, the combination of high food prices due to the lack of transportation facilities on the one hand, and the irregular and low incomes (UMN 2004, 2008) on the other compromise people's exchange entitlements. Applied strategies are not sufficient to cover basic needs. Further, the decline of traditional coping strategies, including cross-border trade with Tibet, contributes to the populations' food insecurity (Adhikari 2008).

As a result large parts of the population (about 45 percent in summer 2009, WFP 2009b) face food insecurity in Mugu. Women often carry the greatest burden of coping as they are

[1] The Karnali zone includes the districts of Mugu, Humla, Dopla, Jumla and Kalikot in the mid-western mountain-region of Nepal.

the ones who eat less or skip meals in order to feed their children and husbands (UMN 2004).

Although most recent reports have shown an improvement of the food security situation in the Karnali zone and Mugu (WFP 2011a), food insecurity in Mugu may not be regarded as a transitory problem, resulting from short-time declines in entitlements due to shocks. Rather, it must be regarded as a chronic phenomenon which is rooted in the century-old history of exploitation and marginalization of the region, and today prevails as a connection of poverty, powerlessness, and exclusion. The food crisis in Mugu is of a chronic nature and must be regarded as a prolonged phenomenon characterised by high exposure of large parts of the population towards various risks and low ability to cope with these mainly due to structural constraints and widespread underdevelopment. The "desperate search for coping options" (Shrestha 1993: 140) and the high dependence on the Indian labour market put livelihood security and food security even more at risk (Thieme 2006: 192 pp).

Food Security in a local Context

The village where the case study was conducted is located near Gamgadi, Mugu's district head quarters. Data collection took place in August and September 2009, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods. Quantitative data were collected through a sample survey, conducted in 28 percent of the villages 117 households, based on a stratified random sampling (Singh 2007: 104) according to three wealth categories. It served mainly to derive a better overview about the basic characteristics of households such as family size, land ownership, sources of food, and health indicators. The core of research formed a qualitative assessment of the reasons for food insecurity, and of the impact of food assistance. The qualitative data were collected through various participatory tools, including social mapping, wealth ranking, seasonal calendar, and trend-analysis (Kumar 2002).

It must be stressed, that the findings only present observations from one village, which were however compared with a second village at a later stage of research; nevertheless, their applicability on other contexts in Nepal should be tested by further research.

The village consisted of 117 households, comprising three castes. 70 percent of households are Dalits (Lawad and Nepali), 30 percent Thapa (Rawad). In order to analyse the food security of different groups of the village, households were divided into three wealth categories, using a wealth-ranking-tool. Nearly 70 percent of the villagers were thereby classified as having huge problems maintaining their livelihoods, only three percent were classified as being capable of maintaining their livelihoods without huge problems. Main distinction criteria for the categories were household size, number of children, amount and regularity of income, skill and educational level. Interestingly, food production indicators such as field size or amount of production did not serve as initial distinction criteria. Rather, participants of the discussion stressed that the endowment with land within the village was relatively equal, an observation which was also supported by the quantitative data of the sample survey. The wealth ranking partly reflected differences between castes with a higher share of Dalit households in the middle-and worse off categories, and a relatively higher share of Rawad households in the better-off one.

In the following, I will first elaborate on the food security situation of the households in the village, before turning to the question of what effects FFW did have on this vulnerability context.

According to the three wealth categories, an analysis of households' vulnerability to food insecurity was undertaken.

Differential access to various sources of food

The village's households are characterised by chronic food insecurity which stems from a combination of low production entitlements, and unreliable exchange entitlements. However, households preserve different entitlement sets which are based on their endowment with certain assets and also reflect their social position within the broader political economy.

Production entitlements are generally low and not only resulting from small plot sizes (0.4 ha in average, without huge differences between the interviewees) but also from the low standard of technization and the total lack of any irrigation facilities which exposes agriculture to the vagaries of weather, such as droughts. Although villagers stressed their equal endowment with agricultural land, there were differences between households regarding the sufficiency of food production. These differences could only partly be explained through differing household sizes, suggesting that there might be huger differences regarding plot size than told by the villagers. Although the own production sufficed for only 3 (in the worse-off) to 6 months (in the better-off group) of the year, all wealth groups stressed that their domestically produced food was their main and most important source of food. Further, it was regarded as the source which was easiest to access, in comparison to other sources such as the market, or relatives. Yet, as production entitlements are low, villagers engage in a range of other livelihood activities that combine their production entitlements with exchange and work-entitlements. These, however, displayed some clearer differences between the three wealth-groups.

Due to their employment in Government or NGOs many better-off households preserve more and relatively secure income so that it is easier for them to purchase the expensive food from the market. Those employed with the government usually hold higher degrees of education, suggesting that education is one determinant for attaining such jobs. Furthermore, through their linking social capital (Bohle 2005: 68), their access to the state subsidised rice (provided through Nepal Food Corporation, NFC) is higher, whereas other villagers often find it difficult to receive the amount of 10 kg rice per month. In addition, the NFC supplies subsidised rice to state- and NGO-employees through a quota system, allowing for more reliable distribution of this source of food for those working in these institutions. Other villagers – in comparison – often have to wait for days in order to be given some rice by the NFC under the ward system.

In comparison to those working in NGOs or governmental jobs, worse-off households often engage in irregular unskilled daily wage labour and thus earn less. This includes skilled or unskilled labour such as house construction, carpeting, portering, livestock farming or sale of herbs. A common form of employment is the so called *baure kaam,* a socially less valued work on other people's fields. This also includes the carrying and breaking of stones or sand and was regarded as an unpopular strategy by the villagers. As these income sources are rather unreliable, members of the worse-off wealth group depend more on networks of mutual help with other villages, the extended family or friends. Among such networks is the *lagi-lagitya* system, a traditional patron-client relationship where the *lagitya* (a member of the Lawad caste) provides services, mostly in terms of handicrafts – to one or more *lagis*, higher-caste members from different villages that provide a small amount of food in exchange. This system – however – was not regarded as an important source of food due to the small amounts provided. Another form of traditional exchange is *besaya.* This includes the

purchase and exchange of food in lower places of the region (e.g. Jumla, Sinja), or from other villages, meaning that villagers have to leave their home for several days in order to bring (and carry) food. However, this source of food was not regarded as important because the food obtained was only sufficient for about two weeks of a year. Further, it was regarded as difficult to organize food from places as far away because one has to carry it. Some elder members of the Chhetri group also mentioned that going for *besaya* was regarded as a strategy which only lower-caste members of the village employed, suggesting its low social value. However, members of the two worse-off wealth groups spend about 10 percent of their income on food purchased through *besaya* in the month previous the interviews.

Interestingly, a huge amount of money (about 40 percent of food expenditure of the worse-off group) was spend on the purchase of WFP rice, which had been intended for distribution to other more remote villages. Due to a lack of transportation in the summer months (when mules are on the high pastures), however, these recipients decided to sell their rice for a lower rate compared to the market price, instead of transporting it home, so that those villagers of the study village, which is closer to the airport, could profit from food assistance, although they had not directly been targeted by the programme in that time.

Another important source of food for the worse-off group are wild crops, reflecting the need to depend on freely available sources of food. The importance assigned to wild crops increased from the better- to the worse-off wealth group.

A common strategy among the two worse-off wealth groups is also the working migration of men to India; sometimes even the whole family migrates. Only members of the middle- and worse-off wealth groups ever migrated to India, while those better-off stayed in the village.

To cope with acute lacks of food mainly poorer households apply a range of devastating strategies such as selling of assets or eating less/skip meals. In many cases women carry the heaviest load of daily coping with food and cash shortages, because they decrease their food consumption in favour of men and children. Among the strategies which villagers regarded as worst were the skipping of meals, sending children to others for food, and taking children out of school for work. These three strategies were only employed by members of the worse-off group during the study-period suggesting their higher food insecurity compared to the better-off groups. This observation was supported by the relatively higher numbers of children under five malnourished[2] and the alarming 31 percent of children that had died before reaching the age of five within the worse-off wealth group.

Summarizing, it can be stated, that wealth groups in the village correlate to different degrees of vulnerability to food insecurity, determined by broader social, political, economical, and cultural aspects. The most vulnerable households are those with low domestic food production per person, who do not have sufficient and regular income to purchase food at the market, who lack physical ability to purchase cheaper food from places further away, who lack social networks to migrate, who lack education to obtain more earnings through migration or local government/NGO work and who lack the linking social capital to NFC or parties.

[2] Malnourishment among children under 5 was measured using the Middle-Upper-Arm-Circumference (MUAC) (see ACF 2008).

The important question now is, whether food assistance influences these nets of dependence and inter-dependence (Harvey/Lind 2005: 35). The influence of food assistance in this context can only be understood *relative* to other sources of food and the access to them.

4 The Impact of Food Assistance

In order to address the critical food security situation in Mugu, the UN World Food Programme (WFP) started its interventions in 2003, first through a Quick-Impact-Programm as a direct response to the armed conflict between Maoists and state forces. This and two other emergency operations were followed by various Protracted Relief and Recovery Operations (PRROs) starting in 2008 (WFP 2009a). While emergency operations are a direct response to declining food security of populations and have the main task to safe lives, PRROs are situated to bridge the gap between rather short-term and longer-term developmental programmes (WFP 2008a). Their main objectives are relief and recovery (WFP 1998, 2008a). The initial aims of the PRROs in Mugu were to provide support to drought- and conflict-affected populations in order to (i) safeguard livelihoods and lives, and to create assets, and (ii) to support the return and rehabilitation of former Maoist combatants (WFP 2009b). WFP describes the PRRO as follows: “Its three priority areas are: critical infrastructure development, return and reintegration, and non-formal education” (WFP 2009a). While the return and rehabilitation package was part of the overall UN peace mission to Nepal which started after the end of the civil war in December 2008, the livelihood support package is still ongoing. The aim of the livelihood support package is to reduce vulnerability and provide immediate food security while enabling people to create assets to improve their longer-term food security trough FFW-activities (also referred to as: Food for Assets or Food for Enterprise). The basic idea of this activity is to provide food to needy communities during times of severe food insecurity. In exchange for the food assistance households work for communal asset-creation and -rehabilitation, e.g. the building of irrigation channels, schools, health posts or wells. These assets are expected to contribute to development and increase food security in the longer-term. FFW is therefore – according to its description – part of a social safety- and cargo-net in so far as its helps people to retain their assets, while at the same time contributing to the creation of assets (WFP/NDRI 2008: 7). It utilizes households’ labour endowment and transforms this into food resources on the one hand, and community assets on the other. Besides these activities FFW also includes supplementary feeding for children under five, and non-formal education for all participants. The PRRO from October 2009 to June 2010 covered 13 Village Development Committees (VDCc) and reached 29,333 beneficiaries in Mugu. The total amount of food distributed was 1040 metric tons (WFP 2009a).

The study village had first received food assistance in 2003, and since then four more times (till 2008) under the FFW programming. In exchange for 40 days work (including 8 days of non-formal education) one person is provided 4 kg rice a day, summing up to 160 kg rice per working period. Sometimes also seeds or lentils are distributed. The distribution of rice and implementation of the program was carried out by local NGOs. The rice is transported by WFP helicopters and private airlines to the nearest airport (in Talcha) and must be picked up by the villagers. More remote villages are provided with money for transportation. The targeting of VDC wards is carried out based on a three-monthly Food Security Assessment

carried out by local NGOs, government stakeholders, and the WFP field monitor, together comprising the so called food-security-network. Within the selected villages one member of each household is entitled to participate in the FFW-program. The decision of what will be constructed is taken by the villagers in a participatory way, a local user committee comprising different groups of the village, organises the work and food distribution at the village level.
During the time of data collection the study village did not participate in any FFW programmes so that the above described food security situation reflects the situation *without* food assistance, and the description of effects is therefore based on accounts of the interviewees.

Based on the discussion on food assistance's potential positive and negative effects, I will now focus on insurance and transfer-effects. I also address its role as a safety-net and for longer-term development.

Insurance-effects

The study revealed that the insurance effects of food assistance were minimal. Although during WFP food provision, the assistance was regarded as an important addition to other sources of food, thereby increasing the overall well-being and feeling of security (see also discussion on transfer-effects), its role as an insurance prior to the distribution was minimal. This is mainly due to the fact, that potential recipients lack basic and timely information on the future provision of food assistance. Food assistance is therefore perceived as difficult to access. This lack of transparency was also reflected in the villagers' assumption that the selection of VDCs for the distribution of support was determined by powerful political leaders, whom their village lacked, which served as an explanation for the current exclusion of the village from FFW. Due to the lack of information, food assistance becomes unreliable. As villagers do not know when food assistance might be distributed in future, they do also not adjust their livelihood strategies prior to the distribution, including migration to India, and engagement in domestic works.

Once, food assistance-programming had started, however, the provision is regarded as relatively timely and according to the schedule. General hindrances are the instable political situation in the Terai, recurrent *bandhs,* and adverse weather situations, hindering the transportation of rice.

Nevertheless, although people do not have information on the provision of food assistance, they have very high expectations regarding the future provision. This became especially prevalent in the worse-off wealth group indicating where food assistance plays a more important role.

To summarise, these findings put a question mark on the role of food assistance as a safety-net. The concept of safety-nets suggest that they must be regular, reliable, timely, and transparent (see FAO/GTZ 2005) to enable people to rely on it also prior the concrete distribution of aid. Lack of transparency, and longer-term planning on side of the WFP, which is itself dependent on donors' funding decisions, hinder the proper application of food assistance as a full-fledged safety-net on which people can readily rely in times of crises.

Transfer-Effects

Once the distribution of food assistance has started, it provides an additional source of food for the recipients in form of a transfer.

The findings of the study revealed that the food assistance's transfer effects were mainly positive. Households replied that through food assistance they were enabled to preserve their assets during crises, and that all household members were able to consume sufficient food. Further, the reliance on less-privileged coping mechanisms such as migration to India, or doing *baure kaam*, declined during food assistance. Further, recipients reported a general improvement of their well-being, and an enhanced feeling of security. Also the need to exploit natural resources, such as the (illegal) sell of firewood, declined. These findings were also supported by the sample survey, which stated that food assistance provided food for additional 1.4 months (in average). However, in one household the additional food was only sufficient for 0.4 months, suggesting, that the need for food aid changes according to household characteristics such as family size and amount of own production. Further, these findings reveal that the additionality to regular sources of food is rather low, and only relaxes household constraints immediately during and after the provision, but not in the longer term. Some villagers even described the food assistance as a "snack" not being sufficient to feed a whole family over a longer period of time. Nevertheless, the additional food supply seems to affect intra-household distribution, as some women stressed that due to WFP they could eat enough. Women of the worse-off wealth-group expressed their gratitude by comparing WFP with a king.

The findings further reveal that food assistance was not only an important factor for household's assets-preservation, but also contribution to assets-creation. This includes the creation of human capital through informal education lessons, or the construction of infrastructures such as trails or buildings. Also social capital was positively affected, as during FFW implementation all members of the village regardless off their caste of economic wealth were working (and eating) together. Also the ability to support neighbours and friends increased due to food assistance as households had more resources to share, although the need for such help declined during food assistance provision.

However, despite the positive changes through the transfer of food, respondents mentioned several negative impacts. 45 percent of respondents mentioned time-constraints as a problem, as participation in FFW prevented them from engaging in domestic field work or employment. Although all interviewed households regarded domestic production as the most important source of food, the expected higher pay-offs and reliability of food assistance led to their participation in FFW. Yet, respondents stressed that they would never totally give up their domestic field work; rather, even during programme implementation they held down their jobs in free time besides FFW. This finding very much opposes perceptions of food aid-recipients becoming lazy due to food assistance. Rather, the engagement in food-for-work must be regarded as an additional strategy being combined with other activities. Other effects of time-constraints are the employment of children for domestic household works, instead of sending them to school, and conflicts among family members, reducing the overall feeling of enhanced security through food assistance. Furthermore, food assistance seems to create disincentives for participation in VDC community works because the payment by the VDC is comparable lower.

Another negative effect is the rising rates of air-cargo to Mugu; due to food assistance the demand for air-transportation increases, which translates into higher rates per kilo air cargo, making it difficult for local traders to bring goods at an achievable rate to the market. This also resulted in increased commodity prices, therefore decreasing the affordability of goods for local consumers.

Food assistance in the form of rice is often believed to be responsible for changing recipients' food habits and decreasing their traditional ecological knowledge about wild crops, increasing their dependence on generally non-affordable items (Upreti 2008; Wahlberg 2008: 7). Indeed, food habits in the study village seem to have changed. The traditional staple food millet is now being accomplished by rice, if available, consumed in the evening. It is however difficult to blame food assistance for changing food habits; rather, rice is also provided at the market in Gamgadi, and distributed by the Nepal Food Corporation (NFC). Locally grown millet is hardly available at markets, as producers usually do not sell it in order to consume it themselves. Further, food habits should be distinguished from food *preferences*. The preference for rice should be understood as a combination of cultural, practical and historical reasons. In Hindu culture doing *puja* using millet is simply not possible – rice is necessary. Also the previous presence of the Gorkhali state representatives[3] and their demand for rice (see Adhikari 2008) during travelling in Mugu should be regarded as factor contributing to the perceived social value of rice. Further, especially elders prefer to eat rice instead of millet because it is easier to digest. Women mentioned an ease in work load for food preparation as the preparation of millet bread was more time consuming. In this context the distribution of rice rather attains a wealth-enhancing importance. The consumption of rice has also not led to a decline of knowledge about the preparation and consumption of wild crops. On average, 78 percent of respondents answered that they taught their children about the use and preparation of wild crops. Therefore, it seems unlikely that FFW activities have any substantial long term impacts on food habits when rice is not provided.

Figure 2 summarises the perceived effects of food aid based on a trend-analysis.

	Without FFW	With FFW
food sufficiency	○○	○○○○○
well-being	○○	○○○○○
sale of assets	○○○○	○○
exploitation of natural resources	○○○○	○○
time spend for field work	○○○○	○○
time spend for employment	○○○○	○○
need for mutual help in village	○○○○	○○
conflicts in society	○○○	○○○
participation in community works*	○○	○○○○○
migration	○○○○	○○
education (children)	○○○	○○

Figure 2: Trend analysis presenting the results of a community discussion.

[3] This practice dates back to 1789 when the then Kingdom of Jumla was annexed into the rising Gorkha Kingdom, and the local peasantry had to provide extra services to state representatives including the free provision of rice, and carrying of heavy loads. This practice continued under the Rana-regime, so that elder people still remember this system of free rice-provision.

Summarising, the findings of the study suggest, that food assistance through FFW does help people securing their assets during crises, and increase their overall feeling of well-being and security. Contrary to the accusation that food assistance would result in the decline of recipients' ability to deal with shocks, the findings show that food assistance does not replace other mechanisms of food acquirement but that it rather is an *additional* source of food on which people can rely in the short-term. It therefore does not replace but combine traditional sources of food. However, these positive effects of food assistance only prevail in the short-term. Neither prior nor after the distribution of food assistance does it provide additional security to potential recipients. This is mainly due to two reasons: on the one hand, FFW is not reliable and transparent enough to enable people to readily rely on it and adapt their livelihood strategies; on the other hand, its developmental contributions, e.g. through the construction of small-scale infrastructures, are not regarded as long-lasting and sustainable by the villagers. Instead of building the village path, or improving the school building, villagers would prefer to be given skills-training, and other employment generating activities. Additionally, the VDC secretary criticised the lack of coordination between his office and the WFP. Finally, what villagers needed most was a water pipe, which could not be constructed due to limited resources for non-food items on side of the WFP. Therefore, instead of contributing to a longer-term improvement of the situation in the village, food assistance rather helped to sustain the status-quo, preventing villagers from slipping further into poverty, but yet not helping them to build resilience for longer-term food security.

5 Improving the longer-term Effectiveness of Food Aid

Based on this discussion of food security and the effects of food assistance on the recipients, I will now draw some general findings regarding the effectiveness of food assistance in a broader developmental context.

In "Hunger and Public Action" (1989) Dréze and Sen describe the goal of public action as

> "mak[ing] it possible for all to have the capability to avoid undernourishment and escape deprivations associated with hunger" (Drèze/Sen 1989: 13).

So understood, famine prevention includes not only the protection of entitlements, but also their promotion (ibid: 65), including the access to health, to education or sanitation (ibid: 14). The ultimate goal of food assistance can therefore be described as entitlements protection, and the reduction of vulnerability to food insecurity through an active entitlements *promotion,* including fostering people's ability to cope with shocks and crises on their own.

Safety-nets must be regarded as a valuable first step towards this goal. However, my research findings suggest, that in order to cover the entitlements promotion aspect safety-nets should be complemented by cargo-nets, which actively support people in climbing out of poverty through assets-creation (see discussion in section 2.2). Such an approach, however, can only succeed, if the broader socio-political context, as being constructed by beliefs and values, and determined by power-relations, in which entitlements are embedded, is addressed by an integrated policy. Only by changing these very *structures* entitlements protection and promotion can be successful – the provision of food to recipients on the local level can only be part of such a broader strategy. The differential vulnerability to food

insecurity among the three wealth-groups of the case study suggests that among these structures is not only the access to education, which allows for better and regular employment, but also health infrastructures, access to roads in order to stabilise market prices, and the ways of distribution of subsidised rice through the NFC to name but a few. Most important seems to be a shift in attitude on the side of the Government of Nepal, from an attitude of neglect to an attitude of support towards Mugu and the Karnali region.

There is a need for understanding and addressing the power relations that determine people's access to various sources of food. More in-depth studies that address these aspects grounded in a qualitative methodology are needed in order to better understand the working of entitlements and to find possible ways to promote them in the longer-term. Only qualitative research can complement the mere descriptions of food security indicators by an understanding of the factors *behind* such numbers.

Obviously, food assistance can always only be a part of the solution and must be embedded into broader developmental programmes, designed in cooperation with the Government, other donors and civil society. Such a strategy must be based on the needs of food insecure populations. I believe that food assistance has a huge potential also to address the longer-term needs of recipients, as it covers geographically huge areas, and connects these over a network of NGOs and local implementing partners. However, standing alone it might not be more than a drop in a bucket. Only embedded into a broader joint approach the longer-term developmental effectiveness of food assistance can be increased. This includes the closer cooperation with Government offices at the district and local levels.

The recent WFP country-strategy already takes many of these points into account, thereby stressing the role of WFP in providing a productive safety-net:

> "This approach will address immediate hunger and under-nutrition in the face of shocks while helping households and communities become more food and nutrition resilient in the medium to long term" (WFP 2010b: 2).

One of the means to attain this goal is the building of assets and knowledge to improve agricultural production, access to market and the development of alternative livelihoods (ibid: 25) through food/cash-for-work modalities. This might include support for micro irrigation, green house construction, cultivation of high value cash crops, or the support of farmer cooperatives, to name but a few (ibid). Other priority objectives in this context are measures to increase access of vulnerable populations to government and non government services such as health care and education, and capacity building on the Government level (ibid: 24, 26).

These outlined activities reflect WFP's attempts to work towards more sustainable solutions of hunger and food insecurity, but do only partly reflect the underlying causes of people's vulnerability. Although the general approach of WFP towards a more developmental role in this context should be welcomed, it lacks a clear strategy of implementation which shows what concrete role food assistance could play embedded into broader developmental programmes that tackle underlying reasons of food insecurity and poverty.

Based on this short discussion, following policy recommendations are derived:

1. Work towards the design and implementation of a joint strategy for the eradication of hunger in Nepal.

2. Define the role of WFP and food assistance as part of a broader developmental strategy that aims at reducing people's vulnerability to food insecurity.
3. Conduct an in-depth study on the *underlying reasons* of food insecurity and entitlements-decline, in order to understand hunger as determined by broader political, economic and social structures, and to define ways to foster food security in such contexts.
4. Think about accomplishing the concept of safety-nets by the concept of cargo-nets, helping vulnerable people out of poverty, instead of preserving a status-quo.

The implementation of these suggestions might be first steps towards a situation, where people can lead a healthy and happy live free from the fear of hunger and starvation in future – without food assistance.

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